

# ERNESTO CARDENAL: REFLECTION TO ACTION

**Dow Kirkpatrick** WITH HIS trimmed white beard and shell-rimmed glasses, the slim, middle-aged man in dark slacks and open-collared shirt looks more like a poet than a Catholic monk or revolutionary. But Father Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua is all three: writer, priest and member of the insurgent Sandinista National Liberation Front there. ¶ The 52-year-old poet-priest, who began his religious life in a Kentucky Trappist monastery, sees no contradiction between religion and revolution. In fact, Cardenal says that contemplating the teach-

ings of the Bible led him and many of his followers to Christian resistance against the regime of Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza.

Cardenal celebrated Christmas mass last year as an exile in Costa Rica together with many of the Nicaraguan members of the Christian community he founded on the remote Solentiname archipelago of Lake Nicaragua. They fled their homeland when Somoza's troops occupied Solentiname after a series of Sandinista attacks on government installations in October.

In a borrowed home on the outskirts of San Jose, the political refugees talked about their community and their country.

"Solentiname is very beautiful. Ernesto [Cardenal] came to live among our poverty. That was the first miracle," says Olivia Silva de Guevara, mother of ten children. Six of her sons and daughters took part in the Sandinista raid on the San Carlos military barracks on Oct. 13.

"The second miracle is he brought us the true gospel with love. In Nicaragua the majority of the people are poor, abandoned. Through the gospel a more



dignified life has come to us," Olivia says.

We sat around the table, Olivia and her family. Donaldo was missing—the only one captured. Alejandro, the leader of the attack, and his wife of a few days were there. To make it a eucharist, I had brought bread, cheese and a bottle

of wine. Gloria fried some bananas.

"This is a union of Christians," says Olivia, examining the label on the Spanish wine bottle. "We understand when we share bread and wine that everything is to be shared among all people equally. We don't have the right to give some people less and some more. Jesus divided equally among his disciples."

Cardenal doesn't deny that he is a revolutionary. He says that it is an "honor" to be a Sandinista, named after Augusto Sandino, a peasant leader who fought American intervention in Nicaragua in the 1920s.

"It's my duty as an artist and a priest to belong to this [revolutionary] movement. The poet cannot be a stranger to the people's struggle, much less the priest," he said in an interview.

That Cardenal is a priest-revolutionary is not startlingly new in Latin America. The history of clergy active in guerilla movements goes back to Father Miguel Hidaigo, who launched the Mexican war of independence in 1810 and became a national hero.

But the Nicaraguan priest is the first in modern times to do so with at least the tacit permission of the bishops.

"So far I have had no conflict with the church," says Cardenal, insisting that he does not carry arms or participate in guerilla attacks.

Born of a prominent Nicaraguan family, Cardenal left a promising military career in his country at age 31 for the obscure life of a cloistered monk in the Trappist monastery in Gethsemane, Ky. But there another contemplative author and monk, the late Thomas Merton, urged him to return to Nicaragua after ordination "to found a small lay community without the formalism of the medieval orders."

According to Cardenal, Merton taught him that "the contemplative cannot be aloof from the political struggle, especially in Latin America."

The community, founded in 1966, prospered. Soon Solentiname had a fish and farm cooperative, a clinic and a center for native artisans that has gained

international fame.

The Christian community's life centered around the mass celebrated in the chapel, or in a thatched hut or in the open air on one of the surrounding islands—accompanied by study of the Bible. The campesinos were encouraged to contribute their own insights as to the meaning of the scripture verses.

Cardenal recorded and published these commentaries in *The Gospel in Solentiname*, which has been translated in four languages.

"Contemplation leads to union with God, and it also carried us to revolution," the priest explains.

"Contemplation brought us to the point of identifying with the people, with the oppression they endured. Little by little we became more radical politically, together with the campesinos."

"Looking more deeply at the Bible, we came to understand that the essential gospel message is the bringing about of the kingdom of God here on earth. A just society of brotherhood and love between all human beings, where there are no exploiters and exploited, rich and poor. A society where everyone shares in common, like the first Christians."

How is the gospel of love of neighbor reconciled with the use of violence? "Every authentic revolutionary prefers non-violence," Cardenal answers, "but that is not an option under the Somoza regime."

The Somoza dynasty, frequently accused of flagrant violation of human rights including the massacre of campesinos, has controlled the Michigan-sized Central American nation for over 40 years.

Although Cardenal disclaims any leadership role in the guerilla movement, his influence is credited with winning support for the Sandinistas from a broad spectrum of Somoza opponents—from wealthy businessmen to poor campesinos.

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Dow Kirkpatrick is a Methodist minister and writer currently covering church involvement in social change in Latin America.

# HOW COMPATIBLE ARE MARX & CHRIST?

**Jim Gorman** THE ADVANCE literature billed the conference as "The First North American Christian Marxist Conference." While that was true, organizers could be accused of splitting hairs; the well-publicized "Theology in the Americas" conference held in Detroit in the summer of 1975 was about Christianity and Marxism and was held in North America. But there are differences; the focus of this conference was clearly North America and its immediate socio-economic future.

Meeting outside of Philadelphia early this spring, about 200 participants gathered to struggle with the issues raised by Marxism in its varied forms. Participants came from all over the continent—Montreal, the Ivy League East, Chicago, California.

This was an academic conference in tone and process. The setting was bucolic—a creek with azaleas blooming along its bank ran like a Disneyland moat around the conference center. That picturesque scene belied the grueling pace of the plenary presentations and many sectional papers inside.

Besides academics, there were sev-

eral denominational executives present. World and global ministry board executives from at least four denominations attended. That may reflect the fact that the organizing committee is directly linked to the National Council of Churches by a group called "Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe" (CAREE).

This conference may be a sign that socialism, even Marxism, is again becoming a legitimate topic of conversation among liberal American Christianity. The importance of this conference was that it was not primarily about Marxism as it applies to Europe or Asia

or Latin America (presumably fairly "safe" academic topics). It was a gathering of Christians and Marxists and Christian Marxists to discuss the future of North America's economy and society using, perhaps for the first time in recent years, Marxian tools.

Marxists were invited from all points on the spectrum of the American left; however, it was clear that while democratic socialist Michael Harrington was enthusiastically received, Victor Perlo, economist for the Communist Party, was not. The tone of the conference leaned in favor of what Ernst Bloch called the "warm stream of Marxism."

Christian nervousness about such categories of Marxist theory such as "dialectical materialism" (materialism is the problem) and "economic determinism" were somewhat allayed by wading with Harrington and others in the warm stream. "You either think more organically about the concept of matter," one participant remarked, "or you blame the whole materialist thing on Engels."

But the issue of economic determinism was not so easily dismissed. Charles West, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and author of several sympathetic books on Marx, asked a younger participant whether he would call himself a Marxist. After saying that he was, the younger man asked West if he could say the same.

"No, I'm not," West said without hesitation. "There seems to me to be other determinants for the human personality than economics." There was

still a hesitancy to reduce the power of God or God's love to purely economic terms.

Though the conference raised many areas of disagreement, the overall feeling was not argumentative. It stands as an indication of the openness with which the participants and their affiliated denominations are approaching dialogue. Though a modest sign, to be sure, its importance is too easily understated.

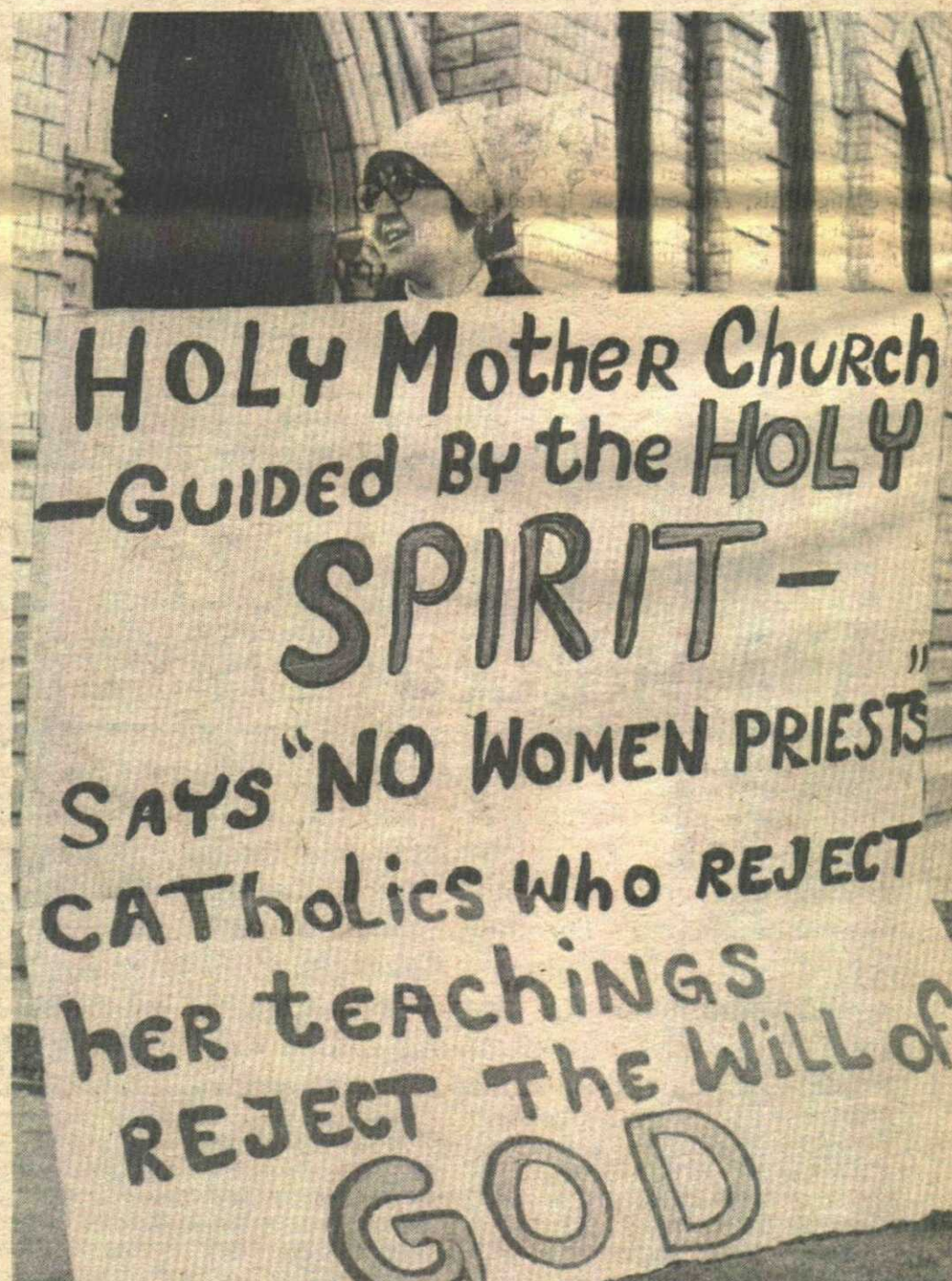
Many were there seeking tentative answers or positions that would explain how Christians and the Christian church could again accept responsibility for social change. They were asking whether Marx, or some other form of structural critique, could be helpful. Some—those who styled themselves Christian Marxists—had settled some of those questions.

The majority, however, wanted to find ways of working on social and economic justice from the perspective of the church. In a sense, they came to affirm one another in the knowledge that the church—in spite of a well deserved reputation for reactionary politics—still had revolutionary work to do, and that such work was politically feasible and biblically mandated.

It could safely be said that there was considerable agreement that the biblical God is a God of Justice who is impatient with feasts and solemn assemblies while there remains whole classes of people who are structurally excluded from the bounty of creation.

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Women in the churches face many of the same problems as they do in the larger society, but in increasing numbers they are rising up and demanding equal rights and responsibilities. In the process they are transforming many traditional aspects of church society. Top: An anti-war protest in New York. Left: Elizabeth McAllister speaks at a memorial rally at Kent State. Above: Protest against the possibility of women priests. Bottom photos by Al DiFranco



# BORN-AGAINS MAKE NO CONCESSIONS TO AUTHORITY

Jim Wallis

**A**ERICAN evangelicals have been discovered. † This January the evangelical National Religious Broadcasters held its annual convention in Washington, D.C., as it has done for years. This time, however, the *Washington Post* carried a story on the convention before it even began. CBS camera crews filmed the opening session and beamed their report nationally. † The press room was bulging as media people from around the country, from Canadian television, and even from England, all gathered to cover the four-day session.

The event that prompted the media discovery of the evangelical world was the presidential campaign of a born-again Southern Baptist named Jimmy Carter. The tremendous media hype and focus upon evangelicals conveys a loud and clear message: that born-again religion is "in"—and everywhere.

Media fame has become the reward for religious conversion. Former White House villains, ex-revolutionaries, Olympic athletes, beauty queens, television and movie stars, generals, politicians, pornographers, and what by now must be more than half of the National Football League have all joined the rolls of most-celebrated converts.

The experience of being brought out of their ignored existence as a minority subculture has been a heady one for evangelicals, and one that is fraught with dangers.

For a very long time, evangelicals had considered themselves an overlooked minority group who believed they carried the heart of the American nation in their souls. For such true believers the experience of neglect at the hands of the majority culture has been a difficult one.

The media attention since the Carter candidacy has finally given evangelicals a long-awaited cultural acceptance and influence. Tired of being ignored or ridiculed, evangelicals now bask in the limelight of their new popularity. They also seem all too willing to be seduced by their culture.

**The former minority status of evangelical Christianity was founded upon the belief that Christians should be separate from the world.**

**The knowledge that Christians should demonstrate a different way of life than that practiced by the surrounding culture is, indeed, a biblical insight.** Unfortunately, evangelicals have characteristically made their stands against the culture mostly in the wrong places.

Twentieth century evangelicals have largely ignored the most basic conflicts between the gospel and American culture while clinging to carefully defined "separations" from the world over trivial matters of personal behavior.

It is the evangelicals' understandable reaction against this narrow legalism that stokes their new desire for cultural acceptance. The meaning of the present evangelical "revival," so far, is that evangelicals are accepting the culture on its own terms. After being neglected for so long, evangelicals are eager to prove that they can "make it" in this society.

And they are making it on the terms that this society understands the best: success, fame, prosperity, social influence, and above all a thorough-going loyalty to the "American way of life"—

fidelity to the American system of economics and politics.

This new evangelical embrace of America is not simply the old right-wing fundamentalist stance. It is a more subtle sense that success, acceptability and respect in this society should come naturally to evangelicals, and that conversion ought to produce these fruits.

Evangelicals are, therefore, more and more at ease in the land. As the old fundamentalist opposition to the world is dropped and evangelicals come out of the closet, the alliance between evangelical faith and the leading cultural values and social structures of America has become stronger than ever before.

How has the media's discovery of evangelical religion affected or will it affect the gospel's impact on this society?

Here again the situation is very confused and distorted. What the media-centered evangelical revival conveys to the larger society is that the born-again experience is a highly personalized matter that actually helps one to get along better in America.

The characteristics of the gospel that are least marketable—self-sacrifice, servanthood, the way of the cross, identification with the poor and oppressed, a prophetic witness to the state, a life of simplicity and sharing, justice and peace—are those characteristics that don't get communicated to the society when the media explains what being born again is all about.

The evangelical hunger for legitimacy is at the heart of the problem. Legitimacy becomes defined in terms of the present system. But is the present system legitimate in biblical terms?

The question is never asked or answered. The media image is of an evangelical world whose faith and style of life serves to reflect and affirm the most basic values of the system.

**There is, however, a small minority of evangelicals whose encounter with Jesus Christ and whose roots in the Bible are making them radicals in America.**

**Radicals sprung from the evangelical world are seeking the renewal of the church's life at the local level, and are influencing the wider church by calling people away from the reigning idolatries and providing the foundation for a more prophetic Christian social witness.** They could even help spark a radically progressive social movement in this country, offering some hope of renewed corporate vision.

Such a movement will probably come first around grassroots issues and concrete national problems. It will rest not so much on the gaining of political power as on the changing of consciousness and the broadening of the framework of political and economic conversation.

The recovery of the radical biblical

tradition in the U.S. has already begun. The key to it is the integration of spiritual and social renewal.

A new style of life rooted in the gospel is emerging as a number of evangelicals are uprooting themselves from the social and economic mainstream and relocating in the marginal sectors of American society—among the poor and dispossessed. This is changing their perspective as they learn to look at American reality from the bottom up instead of from the top down.

We live in one of the most self-centered cultures in history. We have an economic system that is the social rationalization of sheer selfishness. When the rhetorical veil is ripped away, our politics are revealed as being based on coldly calculated self-interest. Self fulfillment and satisfaction are the undisputed and unrivaled gods of this culture.

All this has produced a self-centered religion, and the born-again phenomenon has played into the self-centered consumer ethic of this society.

The leading question of the evangelical "revival" has become, "What can Jesus do for me, how can he make me happier, more content, more successful, better adjusted and more prosperous?"

When self-centeredness is a chief social value, it can easily become the goal and shape of religion. Conversion brings Jesus into my world, to make him mine, to use him for my purposes. Conversion becomes a thing that happens only within the self, a strictly personal experience.

The central call of the gospels—to follow Jesus and become a disciple—is what is most notably absent in the present born-again frenzy.

The central notion of conversion in the scriptures is essentially a turning from and a turning to. The fruit of conversion is the creation of a new life in a new people. In the Bible conversion is historically specific. And the times of genuine revival in church history have been most marked by an understanding of conversion that had concrete historical meaning.

For example, in the 19th century, Finney's preaching left abolitionist societies in its wake. People were called to turn from slavery and turn to Jesus Christ.

**Biblically, it is always the crucial response of repentance—and turning to God and to the fulfillment of God's purpose in history—that marks conversion. To convert means far more than to experience the psychological, emotional aspects of change through an inner experience. The biblical accent is clearly on a reversal of direction, a transfer of loyalties, a change in commitment leading to the creation of a new community.**

Conversion, in its original meaning, meant that those who had been transformed by Jesus Christ experienced a change in all their relationships, including their relationship to the world, to their possessions, to the poor and dispossessed, to the violence in their society, to the idols of their culture, and to the false worship of the state.

There has been much confusion about the meaning of conversion, especially where contemporary evangelicalism has been most widely discussed. People are being called to Christ in an historical vacuum.

We have forgotten that a relationship to Christ means a relationship to the purposes of Christ in history.

The connection between conversion and radical participation in God's historical purposes is the key to genuine revival. Anything less does fundamental damage to the meaning of conversion.

The meaning of conversion in our time must be intimately connected to the mad momentum of the nuclear arms race; to the desperate plight of the poor, the hungry, and the dispossessed; and to the quest for justice and human rights around the world.

As Christians become deeply involved in the cultural mainstream, drawing

close to the centers of political power, they are increasingly tempted to maintain that their faith deals only with matters of personal salvation and relationships and is thus devoid of political content. Every regime wants a definition of conversion it can control.

The central question is whether evangelical revival will be used to sanction and legitimate the present American order or whether the resurgence of biblical religion in this country will serve to call this order into question in fundamental ways.

The evangelical tradition has the capacity to fundamentally challenge the American status quo and to offer a fresh corporate vision of justice and peace firmly rooted in the biblical witness. But, thus far, the present evangelical revival has shown a characteristically evangelical preference for proclaiming personal virtue while ignoring its conformity to the most basic economic and political realities of the American power structure.

Evangelicals still seem to believe that the spread of personal piety is the most reliable standard for a nation's morality. What the evangelical movement has yet failed to say is that the biblical demands for justice and compassion bring the harshest kind of judgment to the system of wealth and power upon which the society is based.

**While the state will strive to keep evangelical religion a civil religion, a growing number of evangelicals will find their biblical faith making them increasingly**

## The longing for stability can destroy

**uncivil in regard to the present economic and political order.**

There has always been a very basic contradiction at the heart of America's use of biblical faith for its own purposes. That contradiction is slowly being exposed.

A revival of genuine biblical faith in this country may in fact provide the strongest foundation and resource for social criticism and social change. For while the Judaeo-Christian heritage has consistently been distorted to serve the interests of those in power, it is that same heritage that offers the most fundamental kind of challenge to the prevailing order.

A whole new generation of radical Christians may turn America's traditional affirmation of the biblical heritage on its head. That biblical heritage can then be used to attack the system rather than to defend it.

It is these biblical seeds of protest, political resistance, social change, and alternative vision that could most threaten the present American status quo. An American radicalism that is biblically based and conceived in the churches could be a far more serious threat to the established order in America than political responses that are based merely on secular ideology.

America has long sought to justify itself in Christian terms. That practice may come back to haunt the leaders of the American power structure as we witness a whole new generation of radicals whose opposition to the regime is based on their relationship to Jesus Christ and whose protest is cast in specifically biblical terms.

**Jim Wallis is the editor of *Sojourners* (1029 Vermont NW, Washington, DC 20005, subscriptions: \$12/yr.) where a longer version of this article appeared. It is adapted from the 1978 Florence Hamersley Walker Lecture presented at Chicago Theological Seminary.**